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Greg Jaklewicz: Ooohing and aaahing while checking out the new library



Greg Jaklewicz/Reporter-News A look at the new south branch of the Abilene Public Library system toward the side facing the interior of the mall.



Posted: Yesterday 9:00 p.m.

Pretend like you are supposed to be here. Look ...
important.

We'll go in through the outside door.

Let your eyes adjust and ... take a look around. Turn. Turn. Turn.

Yeah ... "Wow!" is right. This is going to be our new library.

Big, isn't it?

And not your daddy's library. We're turning the page.

I mean, come on. It's in a mall, not one of the 2,500 libraries built decades ago with Carnegie money. Our new library is in the old Beall's department store (B-E-A, L-L-S and that spells Beall's ... it was a catchy jingle). The space also housed an Old Navy before that store sailed to The Shops at Abilene, and then a Steve & Barry's. Most recently, it was where fitness fans had roomba to Zumba.

The library won't open for a few more weeks, so try to throttle back the excitement. But when it does open, I bet you're a regular.

A week or so ago, I got a sneak peek of the south-side library, which conveniently is on the south side of the mall. Library staff will have 20,400 square feet to work with — four times more than in the former facility. Even Hillary would call the space yuge.

Nothing is being squeezed in. There are large areas for children, for teens and those who read fiction and nonfiction. There are enclosed areas where you can read and/or meet in small groups in quiet. There is a large meeting room, which will be outfitted with all the technology needed to record or broadcast events. I can see our City Council meeting there.

Staff members will have ample storage space, their own work stations, a project area and even their own break area and lockers. Tremain Jackson, the boss at the former south branch, will manage the new library.

It's a dreamland compared with the temporary location opened in 1998 that became a permanent location in a retail strip center just off the corner of South 14th Street and Danville Drive. Back in the day, it was the starter Hastings store in Abilene and a location difficult to enter, enticing you to cut through the 7-Eleven.

That location recently closed, and staff immediately was busy boxing items to be transferred to the new library. Shelving will be recycled, though end panels will be new.

What struck me first was the enormous space. I expected to hear echoes. It won't look as wide open when the checkout area and books and furniture are added, but it won't feel like a shoe box, either.

What will strike first-time visitors will be the colorfully modern design and smart layout. There was an opportunity to create a library the way it could be designed rather than retrofitting former retail space. Hidell & Associates Architects of Carrollton was hired to design the floor plan.

"We wanted it to be right," Lori Grumet, librarian for the city of Abilene's three-facility system, told me. She was as excited as a first-time grandparent showing baby photos.

The project has taken longer than expected. There were delays in getting materials, she said. But there really was no rush. It's not every year a library opens, so why not do it right?

"We are not playing library anymore. This is for real," Lori said.

As in open from 1-6 p.m. Sunday afternoons. How great is that?

Enough progress has been made to nail down a grand opening. That is scheduled for Nov. 19. Some ribbon probably will be cut and words eloquently spoken by all the right people. The big question will be what's the biggest draw that day — the new library or the arrival of Santa, who also is due at the mall on that date.

Santa may detour to the library before he takes his seat and begins listening to children's wishes.

The new library is a wish come true for many Abilenians. For years, only a downtown library served our city. Branches then were opened,

the south-side location first and then the library on North Mockingbird Lane.

Discussion began in January 2015 about relocating the south branch. The existing space was too small, the location difficult to access and there were maintenance issues. A plumbing problem closed the branch for two weeks that spring.

Long story short, a location was found at the mall and the approval process successfully navigated, with City Council approval in July 2015. What helped immensely was the support of Friends of the Abilene Public Library, who first pledged a half-million dollars toward the purchase of equipment, furniture and fixtures. Additional funding has pushed the total well past \$1 million. The city will pay double the rent for the new location.

There are two entrances, one from the mall and the other from outside. The checkout/reference area will be situated in between. Lori expects some walk-through traffic, but maybe shoppers will become readers.

She does not anticipate security issues.

Mallgoers will be able to gaze into the library through what were store windows. They will see the children's area on one side of the entry and the teen area on the other. A decorative wall of molded gypsum outfitted with LED lights will highlight the teen area. It will be cool to hang out at the library. The children's area will feature computers on which youngsters can enjoy interactive games.

Lori called the enclosed areas "havens" for adults, who can enjoy a favorite book (and their favorite local newspaper) in quiet while settled into comfortable chairs.

The library will be colorful, a combination of rounded features and sharp angles. Visitors won't feel crowded.

There are 43 shopping days left till the new library opens. And, already, I hear that "going to the library at the mall" may be a good cover story for slipping into J.C. Penney or Dillard's. Sorry, but your library card won't work at either store.

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